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Debating Poverty Porn on Twitter: Social Media as a Place for Everyday Socio-Political Talk

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an empirical investigation of how people appropriated Twitter for socio-political talk in response to a television (TV) portrayal of people supported by state welfare and benefits. Our findings reveal how online discussion during, and in-between, TV broadcasts was characterised by distinctly different qualities, topics and user behaviours. These findings offer design opportunities for social media services to (i) support more balanced real-time commentaries of politically-charged media, (ii) actively promote discussion to continue after, and between, programming; and (iii) incorporate different motivations and attitudes towards socio-political concerns, as well as different practices of communicating those concerns. We contribute to the developing HCI literature on how social media intersects with political and civic engagement and specifically highlight the ways in which Twitter interacts with other forms of media as a site of everyday socio-political talk and debate.

Author Keywords

Social media, politics; television; welfare; live-tweeting.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media as a place for civic engagement has received significant recent attention from the HCI research community (e.g. [7, 10, 17, 32, 26, 47]). Much of this work has focussed on how social media can be used by groups to support debate and action around social and political concerns. Such research has often concentrated on understanding and supporting patterns of online behaviours that are aligned with *activism* and with fostering and promoting political *participation*. The study of online

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platforms, including social media, as places that support more casual *everyday* socio-political talk is an area that has received less attention by HCI researchers until recently (e.g. [40]). This is in contrast to scholars from other disciplines, e.g. from media, communications, and politics, who have, for considerable time, explored the theoretical implications of everyday political discourse on the Internet and social media (e.g. [8, 24, 28]). Researchers from these disciplines have recently argued that a *talkative electorate* is a cornerstone of civic society (e.g. [21]) and of deliberative democracy [16]. However argument continues as to whether social media facilitate this [18].

In this paper, we study the ways in which old and new media converge to galvanize everyday socio-political talk, discussion and debate. We are motivated by characterisations of a talkative electorate [21] and of observations regarding the ‘mediatization of everything’ [25], including political debate, in everyday life. Our aim is to understand the actions of users who simultaneously engage with ‘traditional’ broadcast media (i.e. television (TV)) and ‘new’ interactive media (i.e. social media and micro-blogging) through everyday casual ‘social TV’ [11] practices of live-tweeting and second screening. In doing so, we expose design opportunities for digital systems to support everyday political talk, with the longer term aim of equipping a talkative electorate with useful interactive, social digital tools and platforms.

We situate our work within an analysis of 124,008 Tweets related to the UK TV show *Benefits Street*: a documentary series about the residents of a particular street in the UK city of Birmingham, many of whom were reportedly in receipt of state unemployment and other welfare benefits. The series was extremely controversial and received widespread media attention in the UK, with the programme makers being accused of generating a ‘poverty porn’ [29] depiction of welfare claimants for the gratification of prime-time TV audiences [20]. During its original run, the broadcaster actively encouraged Twitter discussion via an ‘official’ hashtag *#benefitsstreet* shown in the opening credits. Our dataset, comprised of tweets using this hashtag over a portion of the original run, shows that commentary and discussion on the issues raised in the programme persisted beyond the periods of broadcast themselves. As such, our analyses of the data are intended to explore how

everyday talk about politics and casual socio-political commentary operates through social media. In a quantitative analysis of the data, we were able to identify two different periods of Twitter activity related to whether the show was being broadcast and ‘live tweeted’ [39] or discussed between broadcasts in a more reflective manner. Our qualitative analysis demonstrates the differences between those periods in how Twitter acts as a platform for both abuse of the people represented and to support discussion related to the wider political narratives surrounding welfare in the UK.

We contribute to existing HCI in two ways. Firstly, we provide an understanding of the ways in which Twitter might be supportive of a ‘talkative electorate’. We show that the observed social TV practices of live tweeting enables socio-political discussion and everyday talk as a response to broadcast media that contains provocative political material. Secondly, we contribute towards an understanding of the design space for the development of social media and social TV services which could more seamlessly support vigorous, balanced, reflective and dialogical socio-political talk.

RELATED WORK

The Digital Public Sphere and Everyday Talk

Research that is interested in the ways that citizens engage with political issues is theoretically dominated by recourse to Habermas’s notions of the public sphere [23] and its place in deliberative democracy [16]. In simple terms the public sphere can be thought of as ‘society engaged in critical public debate’ [23]. Habermas’s deliberations are also conceptually grounded in Marx’s political theory and emphasize that all citizens should have inclusive and equal access to such debate. A range of researchers drawn from fields including politics, communications, media and computer science, have argued for and against the importance of social media as platforms that are supportive of the public sphere in a democratic society. Perhaps despite Habermas’s own warnings, many have put forward very positive claims in this regard (e.g. [37, 43] and [31] who argue that Twitter was directly instrumental in political upheaval in the Middle East). Underlying criticisms of such claims pivot on evidence that platforms such as Twitter are capable mainly of supporting information *delivery* rather than *debate* (e.g. as evidenced through limited replies, and retweets) but most especially that digital platforms have inherent asymmetric power distributions [18] and can be easily dominated, or manipulated, by privileged individuals, communities and corporations. Fuchs [18, p.200] reminds us of Habermas’s principle that ‘individuals (should) have the same formal education (and) material resources for participating in the public sphere’. Though the former argument can be contested empirically (e.g. [46]) it is difficult to argue that platforms such as Twitter can be used equally effectively by each and every citizen.

Recently a number of communications scholars (e.g. [21, 27]) have eschewed grand claims that digital tools may implement a Habermasian public sphere, but instead have suggested that online platforms such as social media might usefully facilitate a *talkative electorate*. This is to say they provide a means for citizens to engage in everyday political talk. Jackson et al [27] suggest that ‘civic culture requires a talkative electorate where discussion is a way of making evident a sense of connection between citizens and the democratic process’. Graham and Wright [21] further assert that it is through ‘participation in informal political talk whereby citizens become aware of other opinions, discover important issues...test new ideas, and develop and clarify their preferences’; Graham most recently [22] suggests that ‘it is through such talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about each other and the political and societal problems ... they face’. A number of researchers (e.g. [24]) have identified the high levels of conflict and disharmony that emerge when discussing politics in online settings. Whereas this can be problematic it is also frequently argued that conflict is a cornerstone of deliberative democracy, and therefore digital systems should not be explicitly designed to remove this [4, 18].

HCI, politics and mediatization

Over the last decade, social action and political discourse has also emerged as an important area of study within HCI. Commonly, this work has focused on how digital technology is appropriated to support social movements (e.g. [7, 47]) or deliberately designed to facilitate engagement in social action or political (e.g. [10, 17, 32]). In a similar vein, there has been strong interest in the ways in which critical [14], participatory [3] and more recently adversarial [9] design practices can raise questions about social norms, politics and democracy. Therefore, work in and around HCI has frequently focused on the ways technology may support activism or social change, with a view to empowering specific groups or communities to engage in activities, i.e. how technology supports practices that can be labelled as active political participation or civil engagement [15]. In contrast, relatively little HCI work has discussed the role of ‘armchair’ or ‘everyday’ online socio-political discussion. An exception is Semaan et al’s [40] recent analysis of interactions across multiple online platforms (the “sprawling public sphere”), revealing how users seek out diverse information and discussants online in an everyday political context. In this paper we focus on similar themes, and are also motivated by the *mediatization* of political engagement i.e. the increasing prevalence of how media (e.g. TV) and mediated communications (e.g. social media) interact with one-another thus shaping and transforming everyday life – including politics [25].

Social Computing, Political Talk and TV

CSCW and social computing researchers have taken the opportunity to analyse large datasets containing political talk from social media platforms. This includes studies of social media use during societal upheaval [26], and of

online sentiment mining during political elections [46]. Of particular relevance here however is a subset of such work which has focused on the analysis of data in the context of simultaneous social media use and TV viewing: a practice variously termed ‘live tweeting’ [39], ‘second screening’ [12] or ‘co-viewing’ [11]. Anstead et al have studied how interaction between social media and broadcast TV has formed an emergent ‘viewertariat’ [2] where Twitter provides a space for discussion in response to televised live political debates [2] and controversies [1]. Doughty et al [11] show how tweet length and frequency may signify differing engagement with TV content, suggesting responses to political material are lengthier and more considered. Doughty et al [13] have also discussed how live tweets related to a controversial TV show demonstrated a high degree of socio-political discussion related to the minority community portrayed in the broadcast. In particular, they suggest that this mix of media acted as a catalyst for online abuse and ‘Othering’ which might be explained through computer-mediated communication theories such as online disinhibition [44]. Their work highlights the ways in which broadcast media such as TV encourages a high degree of discussion and debate online even when the broadcast content does not contain an explicit political message. However, the authors [13] suggest that this, in the context of their study, was essentially problematic due to the abusive nature of much of the discussion. Our stance is somewhat contrary to this in that we argue *all* everyday political talk as something to be supported, encouraged, yet also openly contested.

CASE STUDY: BENEFITS STREET

The focus of our study is the British broadcast TV show *Benefits Street*: a documentary series first aired in early 2014, which documented the lives of the residents living on James Turner Street in Birmingham, England. Across five 60-minute episodes, the series follows the lives of residents as they look for work, deal with problems within families and between neighbours, and engage in petty crime. The dominant narrative from the show is that many of the street’s residents are dependent on welfare payments; this is set against a backdrop of ‘austerity’ imposed on UK society following the global financial crisis, as well as an ongoing program of controversial reforms designed to reduce the UK’s overall welfare and unemployment benefit spending.

Poverty Porn

It has commonly been argued that *Benefits Street* is an instance of ‘poverty porn’ [20]—a portrayal of the poor in order to cause sympathy or outrage to other segments of the public [34]. It has been noted how these portrayals, although undeniably complex, tend to make those in poverty feel victimized, stigmatized and objectified [41]. Jensen [29] further argues that such media leaves little room for constructing critical perspectives, resulting in a state of ‘making the social world appear self-evident and requiring no interpretation’ [5].

Our Research Focus

Our aim was to understand the ways in which Twitter is supportive of a talkative electorate. In particular, we wanted to observe social TV practices of live tweeting and second screening as enablers of socio-political discussion and ‘everyday talk’. We selected *Benefits Street* as an example of broadcast media that contains stimulating, provocative political material centred upon a number of current concerns for the UK electorate – namely those of austerity, welfare reform and the negative perception of communities that are supposedly supported by benefits. Moreover, *Benefits Street* received a significant amount of media interest prior to, and during, its broadcast. This precipitated considerable public interest and thus high viewership figures for the programme (in fact the highest ratings for the broadcaster Channel 4 in two years). This resulted in significant public discourse and awareness of the show, its socio-political content and wider political framing. Following [13] we expected that *Benefits Street* would provoke a good deal of abusive and divisive talk, given commonly highlighted views regarding poorer communities in the UK [30]. We were particularly interested in understanding how these views were countered by more reasoned and critical debate and discussion.

Overall Approach to the Research

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse 124,008 Tweets related to *Benefits Street*. We began our data collection and analysis using the Chorus visual analytic suite*. Chorus provides a means of collecting and generating visualisations of Twitter data based on text mining principles and techniques. Our visual analysis of the data was in two stages: (i) we conducted a time-oriented analysis that provided details of tweet frequency and identified periods of greater and lesser activity; (ii) we used Chorus’ text mining and visualization features to perform a topic-based analysis to generate clusters of tweets based on their semantic content. From here, using insights drawn from the topical clustering, we performed an inductive thematic qualitative analysis [6] on data sub-sets to develop a rich understanding of the talk surrounding *Benefits Street*.

DATA COLLECTION AND INITIAL VISUAL ANALYSIS

We used Chorus to collect tweets containing the hashtag #benefitsstreet. Chorus uses the Twitter Search API [45] to acquire tweets; though our own experience is that the API will return most tweets containing a #hashtag (except those from restricted accounts), it should be noted that Twitter themselves state “Not all Tweets will be indexed or made available via the search interface”. Our dataset consisted of 124,008 tweets posted between 21:52 on the 13th of January 2014 (towards the end of the broadcasting of the second episode) to two days past the broadcast of the penultimate fourth episode at 23:45 on the 29th January 2014. Within this dataset, there were 6,788 unique users and 2,911 @mentions directed to other users or as part of a retweet.

* www.chorusanalytics.co.uk

Timeline Analysis

To begin our explorations we adopted a ‘time-dependent’ view of the data. This, as might be expected, highlighted two distinct periods of activity as shown in Figure 1—‘peaks’ during broadcast (signified by prominent spikes in tweet volume) and ‘off-peak’ periods between broadcasts. While previous research (e.g. [39]) has often discarded tweets that lie significantly outside of broadcast periods, we were interested in this data, as we assumed it would contribute to an understanding of everyday talk.

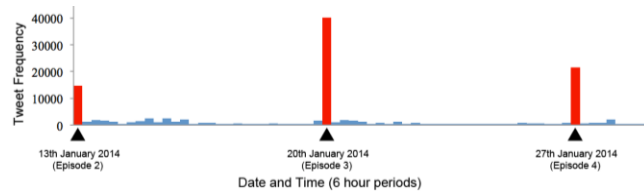


Figure 1 – Timeline View of quantity of #benefitsstreet tweets. Red bars denote periods defined as ‘peak’.

We noted that rises in tweet volume during ‘peak’ periods occurred between 20:00 and 01:30 across the day of the programme’s broadcast (i.e. an hour before broadcast to 01:30 the following morning), with ‘off-peak’ periods occurring outside of those times. By defining these peak and off-peak periods, we were able to split the dataset into two sub-sets such that we could look at each period in isolation in our topic analysis. The ‘peak’ period dataset consists of 76996 tweets, propagated by 5,155 users and featuring 1846 different @mentions. The ‘off-peak’ period dataset consists of 47012 tweets, propagated by 3,501 users and featuring 1,764 different @mentions.

Clustering of #benefitsstreet talk

From our analysis of tweet frequencies, we inductively derived a research question: in addition to being produced at different times and in different volumes, do tweets in different periods (i.e. in ‘peak’ or ‘off-peak’ conversation) reflect different thematic concerns? To explore this we used Chorus’ ‘cluster explorer’ functions to ascertain the key topics within these ‘peak’ and ‘off-peak’ periods. The topical maps (see Figure 2) compute an index of co-occurrence values—the frequency with which a given word appears with all other key words in the dataset. Note that Chorus uses a ‘stop list’ of common words such as “is” and “to” and so on. A given co-occurrence value can be thought of as a probability that, within a particular data set, one word will be found with another in a tweet. Chorus then uses these values as a way of locating individual terms on a 2D map in relation to each other. Words that commonly feature in tweets together are located close to each other on the map, forming clusters that may be thought of as representing distinct semantic aggregations, or topics. Hence, we used Chorus’ clustering of commonly co-occurring words as an entry point into the data corpus.

We then used the topical ‘peak’ and ‘off-peak’ maps (shown in Figure 2) to further filter the data by extracting

terms featured in the single largest topical cluster from each. This reflects a visual analytic approach to Chorus’ cluster maps wherein we visually identified a selection of keywords (appearing in $\geq 1\%$ of tweets) associated with clusters and compiled datasets containing those terms. Through extracting the single largest point of clustering in each dataset, we are left with a refined dataset for each period, consisting of only the key topics that tweeters most frequently commented on. This resulted in 24,759 ‘peak’ and 24,746 ‘off-peak’ tweets in total.

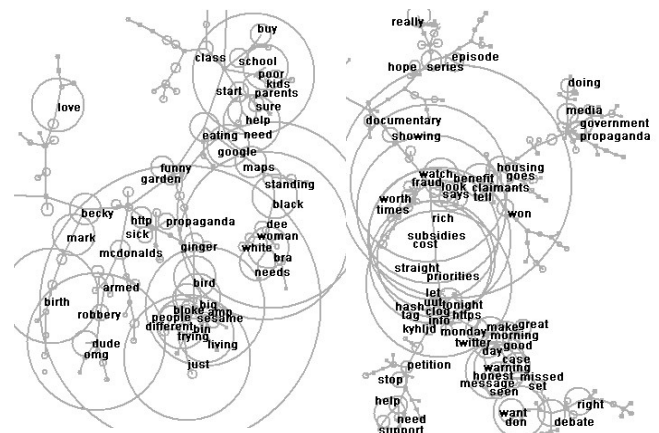


Figure 2. Clustering of discussion using Chorus. Left: ‘Peak’ Clusters. Right: ‘Off-Peak’ Clusters.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Our two refined peak and off-peak data sub-sets were then used as the basis for an inductive thematic analysis. Two researchers initially took a randomised assignment of 20% of each sub-set and coded these independently. Individual tweets were summarised using one or two-word codes through a process of open coding [6]. Once completed, the researchers met to share codes and identify commonalities and differences. From here, 29 codes were agreed upon and used to code the remaining data. Once completed the two researchers met once more to cluster codes around themes that characterise the data. The analysis generated 5 themes: *abusing, critiquing and judging*; *appreciating, defending and contesting*; *politics of public spending*; *politics of fear and propaganda*; and *fiction and reality*. These are now discussed in the following sections, with the quantity of tweets coded in a theme provided in parenthesis.

Abusing, critiquing and judging

The most frequently occurring codes in our analysis (15,832 peak, 8,924 off-peak) related directly to people featuring regularly in the programme: primarily “White Dee”, “Fungi”, “Black Dee”, “Mark”, “Becky” and “the Romanians”. The most retweeted comments during the peak period were directly critical of those portrayed; for example, 776 tweets related to White Dee’s lack of wearing a bra. Other comments would be predominantly negative in their sentiment and comprise of observations related to the appearance of the residents and the ways in which their homes and James Turner Street itself were presented: e.g.

"White d looks like she hasn't brushed her teeth since 1984"; "Why does that Becky always look like that she is wearing the same clothes"; "How people live in shit conditions is absolutely beyond me. Clean your house you dirty scutters". While in many respects the comments in this cluster of data might be considered abusive, there were more subtle commentaries associated with stereotypes related to British distinctions in social class. The comments on how *"dark and dingy"* and *"empty"* the resident's homes appeared in the show seemed to reflect class distinctions and expectations. This was noted further by comments on the brand of clothes some residents wore (*"someone tell that dude helly hensen went out in the 90's!!"*), the ways in which some residents left their doors open or unlocked for neighbours to walk in and out (*"Why are the people in #benefitsstreet unable to close their front doors?"*) and how children were seen to *"roam the street"* or sit around on garden walls (*"Women encouraging her kids to sit on ye wall and go on benefits when they finish school"*).

A smaller subset of peak data (8,526) related to critiques and judgements made on the characters in relation to their motivations to find employment. Comments questioned how much the residents desired to find work or their inability to keep jobs when they are offered to them (*"Mark from #benefitsstreet is an absolute loser. Find a job for the kids"*). Another recurring issue was the ways in which some characters were seen to live beyond their means. Tweets referred how some characters owned premium consumer goods while struggling to pay for food, energy and clothing: *"She got no money for food and stuff but sits there with an iPhone 5s?; Here is a mad idea stop smoking and buying cheap cider and buy some fucking food"*. A further implication here is that these individuals are unable to make informed decisions or prioritize aspects of their life. In one scene, Fungi was seen contacting his estranged daughter for the first time in several years; as he made a phone call to her, he was seen to drop both his phone and a beer can held in his other hand. Comments reacting to this scene chastised his prioritization of not spilling his beer over saving his phone from hitting the ground (*"I'm trying to call my daughter, this is such a big moment for me, I'm so emotional.... FUCK I'VE DROPPED MY BEER, DAMMIT!"*). In a similar vein, White Dee was frequently chastised for not supporting her daughter in her sporting achievements (*"Wants the best for her kids but can't be arsed to go see her daughter run in a school sports event"*) or in her desire to find employment: *"White Dee disparaging her children for wanting to work, not claim benefits. Nice parenting."*

Appreciating, defending and contesting

While the peak data was characterised by overwhelmingly abusive and critical comments of the people in the show, there were also examples of Twitter users being more complimentary to the residents. For example, some tweets conveyed sympathy (*"Find it genuinely sad that people have to use food banks in England in 2014 or go hungry!"*) and concerns for their welfare (*"Funghi is breaking my heart. I hope he really does turn his life around"*). There were also positive attributes in the ways in which the residents engaged with each other (*"Say what you like about these people but the community they*

have is wonderful. They don't have much but they have each other") and their ability to respond to personal challenges (*"White Dee's daughter is a fantastic, smart young lady. I wish her well in her future"*).

It was notable how the frequency of positive comments increased off-peak in comparison to the immediate reactions alongside the live broadcast (2,587 peak, 10,243 off-peak). During the off-peak period there were clusters of data around the terms *"live"*, *"work"*, *"job"* and *"welfare"*, *"poverty"*, *"giving a voice"* and *"hostility"*. Moreover, the word *"welfare"* was connected to much more sympathetic representations of benefits claimants as a general group (i.e. not specifically linked to the people in the programme). Other comments during the off-peak period responded to the ways in which other Twitter users had vilified residents' spending. For example, it was suggested that people should be free to spend their money as they wish (*"It's stupid and selfish to say people receiving money from the welfare state cannot smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol"*) and that they should not be criticised for having treats (*"what's so wrong with somebody eating a Mcdonalds all of a sudden? God forbid the poor can have a treat"*). Furthermore some tweets actively defended the residents in reference to a feeling that the programme was misrepresenting them. Comments referred to how the production process had edited footage to meet popular stereotypes: *"Regardless of what people think of those 'scroungers' the truth is their vulnerable and channel 4 have set them up"*, and that the documentary's portrayal of living on benefits was one-sided and simplistic: *"There is a basic level of living that all need. #benefitsstreet ignores that, instead going for blame & shame"*.

As well as more balanced commentaries on the issue of welfare and the lives of the people in the programme, over the course of the off-peak period, tweets started to link to points made in wider debates related to welfare and benefits. The off-peak data in general was characterised by a greater use of URLs (51% of tweets compared to 25% in peak data) as many Twitter users started to refer to blog posts and pro-welfare organizations detailing the social challenges associated with job loss and living on benefits: *"Don't be taken in by badly researched programmes like #benefitsstreet Get clued up on the real facts on welfare! (URL)"*; *"Benefits claimants are shortchanged by £35bn a year, says thinktank Demos #benefitsstreet #austerity #welfare (URL)"*. Others started to use the #benefitsstreet hashtag to express agreement with views portrayed on other shows discussing Benefits Street: *"Paul O'Grady just nailed it on The One Show, talking about the exploitation of #benefitsstreet"*. One of the results of this contestation was a series of campaigns to create *"more accurate portrayals"* of living on welfare, and petitions to promote changes to welfare legislation. Such tweets typically included URLs to blogposts and campaigns, or to websites where people could sign petitions: *"Read @MairAB alternative to #benefitsstreet on our blog: #reallondonlives"*; *"Think the debate on benefits needs to change? Join #weallbenefit campaign"*.

Politics of public spending

While many of the tweets associated with the spending habits of the residents were direct commentaries on their behaviour, there was also discussion and comment around wider welfare issues. In the peak data, a cluster of tweets related directly to the ways in which residents were “*a drain on society*”; “*It is truly shocking to see so much money is spent on paying people to .. sit on their arses all day.*” Somewhat surprisingly, one section of broadcast content that precipitated this discussion was when a family was shown accessing a food bank—a charitable service that provides food to people in extreme poverty. It was here where we started to see wider narratives emerge that were related to the welfare state as well as feelings of anger in relation to judgements people make when using resources given, or allocated, to them. Some comments would refer to how the residents were spending “*my money*” inappropriately: “*At least the people on #benefitsstreet are putting my money to good use, wide screen tv's, phone contracts and endless booze and fags*”; “*It's a good feeling paying for people to sit on their arses and get drunk all day. Enjoy spending my money*”.

During the peak period, a smaller number of tweets (1,280) referred to state spending beyond welfare and benefits. This included bank subsidies (“*Make everyone think unemployed people are scroungers, and let the bankers and tax-dodgers get away with it*”), politician’s expenses (“*On next week's #benefitsstreet how MP @nadhimzahawi claimed £35000 to heat his stables*”) and low-tax rates for the rich (“*Let's get our facts right – subsidies to the rich cost us 54x as much as benefit fraud*”). However, it was notable how these discussions emerged more prominently in the off-peak period (9,380). During this period, the terms ‘benefits’ featured in 5,016 tweets, ‘fraud’ in 3,379, ‘rich’ in 3,194 and ‘subsidies’ in 2,803. While ‘benefits’ still occasionally referred to the content of the show, we saw more frequent occurrence of its use as a strongly anti-rich (though not necessarily pro-benefits) sentiment. This is due partly to those tweets reminding people to compare benefits fraud against subsidies for the rich, and partly due to several using the same terminology to equate the two: “*#benefitsstreet on C4, exploiting the poor when they could make a show about bankers and MPs the REAL benefits cheats*”. Also, the discussions surrounding who was benefitting from taxation often involved referring to external sources or attempts to incite reactions across Twitter users and other programming. For example, tweets within this topic commonly featured a link to a website[†] intended to redress the focus on benefits fraud with factual information about the state burden of tax subsidies for the rich. Others made attempts to incite discussion by using @mentions to politicians, banks and organisations or individuals that had received subsidies, bailouts and tax-breaks from the UK Government.

Politics of Fear and Propaganda

It was also notable how the peak and off-peak data differed in the ways in which users reflected on the motivations of

the broadcasters and production team (265 peak, 3,267 off-peak). As above, some comments appreciated that the portrayal of the residents was purposely edited so as to incite discussion and reactions. Thus, some tweets raised critical questions about the accuracy of the ways the residents were being portrayed, and whether this was done purely to increase viewership of the show: “*C4 are using naive and vulnerable people to get higher ratings, exploiting their lack of education, media misrepresentation*”. During the off-peak data, this was prominently discussed on Twitter following an interview with the show’s producer on another TV channel discussing its popularity: “*Productions 1st response to whether proud of #BenefitsStreet was to talk ratings. Says it all really*”. Indeed the overall feeling here was that the producers had attempted to vilify and propagate fear of an already marginalized social group without due consideration of the impact this may have on both the individuals and on the wider population: “*Time to portray a small minority as being like all Benefit Claimants #benefitsstreet*”; “*Hate crime against disabled people doubled since 2008. Linked to media distortion*”.

As well as considering the broadcaster’s motivations, questions were raised about who had funded and commissioned the series. Channel 4 sits in the unusual position of being publically owned but funded via advertising; this led to speculation on how much involvement the government had in commissioning the show—leading to calls that it was an act of state propaganda[‡]: “*The govt who owns the broadcaster that showed #BenefitsStreet have a vested interest – cuts or abolition to welfare.*”; “*AGENDA: demonise those on welfare; introduce reforms; desensitise injustice; fabricate consensus ... ACTION: propaganda*”. As such, the “*shaming*” of people on the show was seen to be a purposeful way of deflecting blame away from government policy: “*Shame on a Government which pushes programmes like #benefitsstreet & then does this little to help them in to work!*”.

Fiction and reality

Our final theme related to the framing of the documentary as fiction or a form of *reality TV*. While Benefits Street was framed as a documentary, many people saw it as staged, or scripted, “*entertainment*” (6,792 peak, 2,565 off-peak). This was manifest in tweets where users would explain how they were “*settling down*” to watch it, how they “*couldn't wait for next weeks episode*” or speculation about “*what trouble Fungi will get into next*”. A large number of tweets that were clustered around this theme compared Benefits Street to a number of UK ‘scripted reality’ shows that have come to prominence over the last five years: “*#benefitsstreet is a much better show than #towie and #MadeInChelsea; I suspect that #benefitsstreet needs to be seen not as a Documentary but as scripted reality tv show like #theonlywaysissex #towie was*”. These comments in some respects exposed debate over how

[†] www.parasite-street.co.uk

[‡] This feeling was exacerbated when the government minister responsible for welfare reform suggested that the reaction to Benefits Street justified the changes to welfare in the UK. E.g. see <http://bit.ly/1dWWH47>

much of the show was real, or carefully edited and orchestrated, by the production company. The blurred distinction between documentary, fiction and reality was explicitly referred to by some users: “*is this even real?*”; “*It’s just telly entertainment, use your brain*”. The fact that the show was seen as entertainment meant that serious events were met with amusement: “*how can fungi firstly do armed robbery on McDonald’s and secondly get caught robbing the place bahahahaha #WorstCriminalEver*”; “*funny as fuck, robbing a McD’s with a sawn off shotty an getting caught hahaha*” While reactions like these are not surprising given the resident’s on-screen portrayal, it also highlights the ways in which Twitter reactions sometimes trivialized serious issues.

DISCUSSION

In the following sub-sections, we reflect on our findings. In particular, we discuss the ways in which Twitter acted as a site that supports different forms of talk regarding Benefits Street, poverty porn and welfare, and the ways in which evidence was used to counter the provocative content of the broadcast material and other users’ tweets; finally we offer a series of design sensitivities derived from our findings.

Second Screening and Everyday Talk About Benefits

Our findings highlight the diverse qualities of socio-political talk on Twitter in relation to Benefits Street. It is common for the findings of studies of second-screening and live-tweeting to highlight ways in which users primarily act in response to merely what they see before them. This is in part why analyses of live tweets can be used as a way of predicting broadcast content [42], or as ways of generating ‘ratings’ [36]. We saw similar spikes in relation to on-screen events in Benefits Street. However, we also observed Twitter being appropriated as a site of discussion around the socio-political issues in the show, or those surrounding it. Users embodied a range of opinions and perspectives on the political content of Benefits Street, evoking many of the qualities of an online talkative electorate. In some respects, users’ talk was still based on immediate readings of the political dimensions of the show. Yet others went beyond just accepting the way in which benefits claimants were being portrayed and invoked alternative narratives and readings of the content. For some, the show was seen very much as propaganda, which they were able to interpret and question, thus contesting Jensen’s [29] assertion mentioned earlier. But more subtly, this type of questioning was illustrated by the ways in which the terms ‘welfare’ and ‘benefits’ came to be defined in multiple ways through online discussion. While live tweeting reflected a definition of ‘benefits’ associated with those in receipt of state welfare payments, in the off-peak data we started to see how this was replaced with greater explicit discussion of the term ‘welfare’. In this way, the terms ‘benefits’ and ‘welfare’ became loaded with different emotive contents (one negative, one positive) despite semantically referring to the same thing. This highlighted a significant shift in the ways in which issues to do with the politics of state welfare was being discussed—from seeing the people of James Turner

Street as *receivers of benefits* to the state *looking after their welfare*. This was juxtaposed with a shift in the association of the word “benefits” with tax-breaks for the rich, politicians’ expenses and bank bailouts. Unlike [31], we saw that the discussion alongside Benefits Street was an attempt at more than using Twitter to propagate views and information—more akin to [40], it was used by some to actively seek those with diverging views and attempt to promote and provoke reasoned discussion. However, contrasting with [40] rarely did discussion manifest in ways that were not polarised, likely due to the limited overlap between peak and off-peak Twitter users.

Countering with Mediatized Evidence

Our findings also highlighted how the emergence of more explicitly socio-political talk was often associated with increased referencing to external sources—e.g. tweets from beyond the #benefitsstreet hashtag, the introduction of other prominent Twitter user handles into the discussion, and of course weaving in discussion from commentaries from TV and radio, news sites and blog posts. It was also notable how the references to external sources increased outside of the peak periods. As noted, during the peak period, 25% of tweets included a URL to another data source. However, in the off-peak period, this doubled, along with dramatic increases in the cross-fertilisation of different hashtags related to other programming (e.g. #bbcqt appearing 1,195 times). We consider these noteworthy for two reasons.

Firstly, references to external sources were used to counteract the portrayal of people in the programme. This included links to alternative narratives of experiences of living on welfare payments, to campaigns about the biases inherent in the show and petitions for more representative portrayals. On other occasions, links to third-party sources highlighted the problematic impacts such portrayals can have on the disenfranchised, or the economic impact of other forms of government spending. Throughout both peak and off peak datasets, it was clear that the use of external links was a primary form of countering the portrayal of benefit seekers with evidence. While studies of socio-political talk on Facebook groups have highlighted how the features of that site draw people towards focusing, closing and excluding discussion [7], here we saw Twitter being appropriated to distribute alternative perspectives on benefits. This is more pronounced during off-peak periods, where users indulge in a ‘mediatizing move’ where they decentralise the topic of Benefits Street and connect it to wider issues across a range of media. In many respects, this evidence was being produced to counter what was considered as a lack of evidence on other users’ behalf, or even a lack of evidential basis in the documentary itself. This also reflects prior work noting that more considered comments on Twitter tend to be produced more slowly and are thus less likely to be immediately responsive to the media under discussion [11].

Secondly, the peak dataset was characterised by tweets demonstrating practices consistent with ‘live tweeting’ an event. Users during ‘peak’ periods tended not to rely on outside resources to reinforce their statements and claims—rather, they were voicing opinions and comments for purposes that did not require this level of referential support. As noted, these tweets were typically remarks on the specifics of events in the programme rather than connecting to wider debates or contexts. This gives us a depiction of the ‘peak’ period of tweeting as being one typified by kneejerk reactions grounded in the experience of watching the programme unfold in real-time—resulting in discussion which is tightly and centrally organised around issues arising in the programme. These users also rarely tweeted outside of these periods—suggesting that once they were done watching the show, then so was their interest and commentary. This highlights how much—but not all—of our data is heavily mediatized political talk [27], in that much of it was temporally related to media representations. As such, we might assume that kneejerk tweeters rarely engaged, or came into contact, with the evidenced based commentaries that increased in number during the off-peak periods. Therefore, while some users offer evidence of alternative accounts and understandings of the issues being discussed, these likely do not reach those whose opinions they may be challenging and contesting.

Designing for an Online Talkative Electorate

Our findings present opportunities for designing technologies that might further support political talk and debate. Here we present a series of sensitivities that could drive forward the (re)design of social media platforms with a view to enhancing the potential to support more balanced, nuanced and reflective everyday socio-political talk. In constructing our sensitivities (listed below), we draw on DiSalvo’s notion that ‘the political is a *condition* of life’ which is ‘expressed and experienced in the dealings between people and organizations in a multiplicity of ways including debate, dissensus and protest’ [9, p.8]. We build on this in the specific context of everyday talk emphasised by our study. It was clear during our analysis that while there is much socio-political ‘talk’, this does not always translate into ‘talkative’. As such, we present a number of design principles with which to promote talkative qualities through encouraging contestation and dissensus, which are fundamental parts of the democratic process [16].

Encountering talk: One immediate way of addressing the disconnection between the different qualities of talk arising from commentaries on #benefitsstreet would be to simply raise awareness that different types of talk are occurring. This could be implemented through the notion of ‘encountering’—to be suddenly confronted with a comment or tweet that has been determined as distinctly divergent from views previously expressed. This evokes work such as ConsiderIt [18], which confronts users with diverging opinions in order to support greater deliberation around state elections. However, here we wish to illustrate the

potential of this occurring more prominently in everyday online discussion, rather at the point of explicit witting engagement with political debate.

Contrasting talk: Developing the above, we also might imagine ways of providing simple tools that allow different forms and modes of talk be visually contrasted with one-another. In simple terms, one way of incorporating this into an existing micro-blogging service like Twitter would be to present subsets of ‘trending’ hashtags associated with a particular program (e.g. #benefitssteet #scroungers or #benefitsstreet #bbcqt) which are likely to confront users with different aspects of the discussion that are occurring. This might act as a means to demonstrate that trending topics may in fact be representative of a much larger range of different views which might be worth consideration. This suggestion, of course, also draws on well-known aspects of the ‘filter-bubble’ problem [38] commonly generated by collaborative social platforms and recommender systems, as well as other suggestions (e.g. [33]) on how to solve it.

Contesting talk: A related quality that may be beneficial to support is the contestation of talk. We saw how while there was clearly contestation from some Twitter users of other peoples’ posts, in many respects this was lost in the mass of peak tweets, or because of a lack of awareness. We might imagine that a social media service could have a ‘contestation’ feature. This might have similar functionality to a ‘report’ button—however, this would not be done for the purposes of complaining to administrators but instead to raise awareness of a post e.g. due to its controversy or because it represents a poorly articulated view. A contested tweet may be ‘pinned’ alongside a live tweeted discussion for more users to see and be prompted to responded to.

Interpretative talk: One finding was that while some users posted reflective commentaries on Benefits Street, a large number of peak time tweets simply responded directly to what the show presented to them. As such, it would be interesting to explore ways of prompting deeper and more interpretative interrogations of media. For example, we could envisage a social media service that asks specific questions. In the case of Benefits Street this might be questions such as “Who do you believe funded this programme?”; “Have the issues of state welfare affected anyone you know personally?” This could be used to drive the design of *companion apps* for specific events and programming that might use existing social media services but overlay discussion with other media and content.

Evidencing talk: We saw how those tweets that drew on third-party evidence when making comments were often more critical of the content of the show; in particular using their evidence to present a case for alternative perspectives on the issue under discussion. We argue that encouraging users to evidence certain tweets would be a provocative way of engaging them in both reflection upon their comments and also promoting greater engagement from others. We could imagine a scenario where for certain

hashtags those adding comments would be prompted to submit evidence as URLs. However, as [7] highlights in the appropriation of media and ‘like’ functions on Facebook, we might consider accompanying apps designed specifically for evidence-based talk, which provide a rich range of media objects to be attached and made immediately accessible as part of an ongoing conversation—such as the incorporation of images, videos, and data visualisations. This might support contestation in the form of uploading evidence that contradicts certain statements (e.g. graphs of public spending; videos of welfare claimants volunteering for work) or provoke reflection i.e. highlighting the ways that a much wider sphere of individuals rely on welfare. As well as evidencing, however, it is important to scaffold others engagement — therefore, richly emphasising the evidence in discussion and prompting others to read, view and actively respond to this would be critical.

Maintaining talk: Finally, an issue that is particularly problematic in the context of promoting debate and discussion alongside TV programming is keeping discussion alive once a broadcast is over. In the context of Benefits Street, we did see discussion continue—however, it was separate from that found when the programme was broadcast—and indeed, in many cases this appeared to be discarded when the next episode started. One possible way to maintain talk could be to link those commenting in different time periods more explicitly. This would support more asynchronous interaction and discussion—and would potentially bridge the gap in audiences between responsive ‘kneejerk’ reactions and more reflective commentaries. For example, we might imagine certain tweets or comments that visibly ‘last’, ‘hang’ or ‘persist’ in relation to a specific hashtag. Alternatively, we could see carefully constructed ‘evidencing talk’ that is timed to be repeatedly deployed during a ‘live tweeting’ event. Related to this, work in [35] shows how companion apps can assist in maintaining attention and recognition across instances of broadcasts.

CONCLUSION

We investigated how Twitter discussion and TV interact with one-another in ways that support socio-political talk. Our findings highlight how online discussion during, and between, TV broadcasts was characterised by distinctly different qualities, topics of discussion and user behaviours. A large amount of what we saw could be characterised as being abuse; or, perhaps, jokingly pejorative. This behaviour was mostly targeted towards people depicted in the programme, as well as towards the broader social class that those individuals supposedly represent. This reflects the findings of prior work on the ‘Othering’ of minorities on Twitter [13]; but it also reflects a substantive body of research showing that current attitudes towards the poor in the UK are unsympathetic at best and hostile at worst [30]. While at one level such talk is abuse, or at best an illustration of problematic stereotypes that permeate society, as everyday talk it is also inherently socio-political.

While social media sites like Twitter provide an way of propagating such socio-political talk, and indeed talk that counters these points of view, much could be done to facilitate more balanced, nuanced and reflective—but also deliberative—debate. Through opening up a space for exploring how talk might be contrasted, contested, interpreted, evidenced and maintained, we have suggested practical directions to inform future design work. Looking further forward, generating a deeper understanding of how digital platforms and interaction design can contribute to political engagement, debate and activism is an increasingly urgent line of research for the HCI community. Our own work for instance, raises broad questions about how class, welfare, and poverty are debated in a mediatized society; we call for further research, in particular, which investigates cross-platform, as well as cross-media, engagement with these issues, as well as recognition that the constant shifting picture of social media use (e.g. uptake of media sharing services such as Instagram) will demand new approaches to users studies, data collection and interpretation.

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